The Influence of European Identity on Integration Efforts

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Abstract

The EU's recurrent crises underline its complex and debated nature. Truly grasping its intricacies is key to understanding the tie between European identity and integration. Central to the discourse are questions on whether a shared European identity influences member selection or if the emphasis is on upholding democratic values. Academic discussions have often overlooked a holistic examination of integration processes, treating EU expansions as standalone events without delving deep into the relationship between integration and European identity. This paper posits that the absence of a unified European identity, and subsequently, citizens' disassociation from Europe and its political structures, steers the course of integration, potentially causing stagnation or progression. It seeks to unravel: the nature of EU expansion, the current meaning of European identity versus EU identity, and the influence of identity (or its absence) on integration. Concludingly, it suggests that the EU identity's role in integration is a balance between constructivism and rationalism. Support for the EU seems rooted in citizens' perceived overarching benefits, encompassing peace, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

Keywords: *European integration, European identity, integration processes, theories of integration*

1. Introduction

Debates across Europe, intensified by the EU's continual crises, spotlight its contentious nature, particularly when viewed through the lens of the Constitutional Treaty. This unique political entity's unclear status often spurs questions in public discussions, political spheres, and academic circles. How can we define this entity that doesn't neatly fit the molds of a traditional state or international organization? The EU operates on a distinct, sui generis concept. Only by truly understanding and recognizing its core, we can discern the relationship between European identity and EU integration. Diverse interpretations exist regarding the fundamental nature of the EU and the prospective paths of its integration. Generally, perspectives can be principally categorized into distinct schools of thought: for some, the EU primarily serves as a market, facilitating free movement and fostering economic development; others perceive it as an entity that transcends economic dimensions, embodying and propagating a shared European identity and values. Alternatively, there's a viewpoint that considers the EU as a precursor to democratic, supranational governance. Meanwhile, inquiries are made as to whether the EU's enlargement procedures can shed light on its inherent nature.[1]

The two primary questions we can pose here are: whether there's a sense of shared European identity guiding and

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[1] *Sjursen, H. (2006) 'Enlargement and the nature of the EU polity', in: Sjursen, H. (eds.) 'Questioning EU Enlargement. Europe in search of identity', Routledge, London, fq. 1 – 16.*

influencing the selection of candidates and new members, or if the integration processes primarily aim at ensuring adherence to democratic principles and human rights. While expansion remains a cornerstone of the EU and its enlargement policies are deemed paramount, forming a composite policy[2], from a research perspective, there seems to be a theoretical gap in this domain. The EU's integration efforts and its various expansions throughout its evolution have often been examined as standalone events, thereby not offering a clear understanding of the relationship between integration processes and European identity. One must acknowledge that examining interdependence is crucial for comprehending and perceiving the European Union.

As Albania stands on the brink of EU membership, considerations regarding new member applications and the expansion prospects for Albania and other Western Balkan nations inevitably raise profound questions about the very nature and essence of Europe, its people, and the European Union. Who exactly is considered Europeans, and what values define Europe? Moreover, are these values essential in determining membership? To discern the influence of European identity on integration processes, encompassing both political and economic integration within the EU, it's essential to underscore that: European political and economic integration has been instrumental in fostering peace and prosperity amongst EU member countries and beyond. Additionally, European integration mechanisms and institutions have played a pivotal role in bridging the East-West divide and facilitating the transition from authoritarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, with Albania being a notable example. While the European Union has celebrated numerous achievements, it hasn't been without its share of significant challenges. To name just a few: the rise of nationalism and populism across many European nations, the disjointed response during the refugee crisis, Brexit, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the recent response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

These events, beyond challenging the EU's credibility as a cohesive political entity capable of confronting collective challenges, have also eroded the notion of a unified European identity. The absence of this shared identity and the resulting disconnect many citizens feel towards Europe, its institutions, and its political processes, steer the course of integration. This, in turn, has a direct impact on whether these integration processes stagnate or progress further. Given the premises mentioned earlier, it's crucial to underscore that integration, at its core, is a political undertaking. It's worth noting that while integration processes acknowledge the paramount role of national governments and the significance of intergovernmental accords, they also consider the effects of various contextual elements.

Additionally, supranational institutions hold a central role in steering these processes. Contemplating the policy-making process is essential in deepening our grasp of the dynamics described by Moravcik, particularly the motivations, preferences, and challenges of the central social actors involved[3]. Moreover, the outcomes of this policymaking, and its repercussions on the involved stakeholders, can significantly shape the stance and role of national governments in discussions about the EU's trajectory. Consequently, as the backdrop for crucial decision-making by primary actors (like member states) shifts, the actions of institutions and other influential parties can profoundly influence the course of integration. Integration efforts are fundamentally political in nature, as European integration has become so politicized that it's no longer just an initiative of the elite.[4] As a result, this political structure transforms into a democratic system, and like all democratic frameworks, it relies on the backing of its populace.[5]

2. Integration as an Interplay of Identity, Collective Commitment, and Political Process

When delving deeper into EU enlargement policies, it's evident that numerous scholars have attempted to frame the concept theoretically. Notably, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier have posited that the EU's enlargement is under-theorized as it has suffered from theoretical neglect, despite its timeliness and significance. Those scholars define the enlargement of an international organization as a *"process of a gradual and formal institutionalization of rules and norms"[6]*. Although this definition emphasizes the intrinsic political component of integration processes, yet it also suggests that integration is beyond mere politics, and enlargement isn't solely about balancing the costs and benefits for

[2] *Sedelmeier, U. (2005) 'Constructing the path to eastern enlargement. The uneven policy impact on EU identity', Manchester University Press, Manchester, fq.32.*

[3] *Moravcsik, A. (1993) 'Preferences and Power in the European Community: A Liberal Intergovernmentalist Approach', Journal of Common Market Studies 31:4, 473-524*

[4] *Fuchs, D. (2011) 'Explaining support for European integration: An attitudinal model' in: Fuchs, D./ Klingemann, H. D. (eds.) 'Cultural Diversity, European Identity and the Legitimacy of the EU' Edward Elgar Publishing, Northampton, 220 – 246, p. 220.*

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Schimmelfennig, F./ Sedelmeier, U. (2002) 'Theorizing EU enlargement: research focus, hypotheses, and the state of research', Journal of European Public Policy 9:4 August 2002: 500–528, p. 503.*

participants. While this doesn't negate the validity of rationalist theories in explaining integration and further enlargement, it underscores the potential significance of constructivist theories, especially if we aim to understand the driving forces behind sustained and progressive integration.

From a constructivist perspective, EU enlargement policies are profoundly influenced by conceptual and cultural elements, with communal and cultural unity serving as primary analytic tools. Essentially, examining EU enlargement through this lens involves delving into social identity, norms, and values. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier suggest that a state's alignment with the identity and values of the international community, represented in this instance by the EU, determines its institutional integration.[7]

Essentially, to truly understand the dynamics of EU enlargement, we need to consider both the perspectives of applicant countries and existing member states. This dual perspective allows for a comprehensive analysis of the role identity, norms, and shared values play in the process. While aspiring member countries undoubtedly face more daunting challenges, having to align their political orientation and adapt to European norms, values, and rules, the constructivist perspective suggests that the longevity of the integration process hinges on the cultural and value congruence between applicant states and the existing community. In other words, if applying states share similar cultural norms and values with the community, integration processes are more likely to continue.

Attempting to pinpoint the essence of European identity is a multifaceted endeavor, encompassing a broad range of factors ranging from faith, language, and cultural heritage to historical nuances, moral values, and even technical details like territorial boundaries. Defining and understanding the European Union and its integration processes necessitates a clear comprehension of what Europe and the European Union represent. Given the preliminary inquiries and the various perspectives on the nature of the EU, we're prompted to further ponder on its essence. Is Europe merely a geographical entity with finite borders, or is it a continuously expanding civilizational blueprint? The multitude of diverse questions surrounding the EU, each pulling in its own direction, significantly complicates the task of grasping the EU's core. If the EU is primarily an economic powerhouse rather than a political vision, then the concept and trajectory of enlargement would inherently take on a different meaning.

The myriad of queries presented reiterates that these concerns have evolved alongside Europe's formation, particularly regarding the diverse identities that have taken shape within the context of nation-states. The vision of Europe as a political initiative undeniably poses challenges to the historic narrative of nation-states – confronting their established political traditions, sovereignty, and sparking discussions about the emergence of a novel entity. Each member state, while participating in this grand vision, exerts distinct efforts to showcase its collective intent to coexist harmoniously. Recognizing the catalyst behind this shared intent is important in discerning the factors that drive the integration processes. By zeroing in on the foundational principles that the EU stands upon, the roots of this collective aspiration can be unveiled.

> *"The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities"[8] and furthermore, "Any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union."[9]*

The insights provided by these two articles emphasize that, amidst the backdrop of inevitable multiculturalism in the EU, the shared foundations lie within the core pillars of the European community. Habermas suggests that the current inquiry about the existence of a distinct European identity might not yield a positive response. Yet, he believes the inquiry might be misframed. The real exploration should focus on the prerequisites needed for citizens to extend their civic solidarity beyond their national confines, fostering an environment of collective embrace. This implies that the essence of European identity today is fundamentally rooted in the universal principles of equality, freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. German political scientist Volker Kronenberg posits that the emergence of European identity can be traced back to the foundation of the EU and the shared objectives that ensued. Moreover, Kronenberg elucidates that we are navigating a multifaceted construct. Essentially, European identity should be perceived as Europe's collective consciousness, weaving together diverse historical and cultural narratives. Yet, despite these variances, they converge on the universal

[7] *Ibid., 511.*

[8] *Neni 2, Traktati i BE-së*

[9] *Neni 49, Traktati i BE-së*

principles of peace, freedom, and well-being.[10]

If this is truly the case, then discussions surrounding the concept of Europe and European identity might be deemed obsolete, given that in today's context, multiculturalism is embraced if there's a consensus on upholding those values intrinsic to the EU. This subtly suggests a transition from an emphasis on European identity to a focus on the identity of the collective - in essence, the identity of the European Union.

Considering this perspective, the findings from the Eurobarometer 2015 become even more intriguing. Participants, having acknowledged that European identity might encompass various facets, were queried about the most pivotal elements in shaping European identity.[11] Half of the participants pinpointed democracy and freedom as the primary components of European identity, while less than 30% viewed history and culture as crucial elements.[12] Conversely, geographical factors were highlighted by fewer than one in five respondents.[13] It's evident that within the academic sphere, there's a general concurrence regarding the European identity.[14] Primarily, the evolution of European identity doesn't unfold in tandem with the emergence of national identities. Instead, European identity and its fundamental components manifest as a political identity, with the values and principles of liberal democracy at its core.[15]

3. Conclusions

The shown analysis highlights that it is pivotal to assert that European identity serves as a cornerstone for support towards European integration and the EU. The influence of identity on the political journey of integration is undeniable. Yet, contrary to some expectations, this identity isn't predominantly anchored in facets like religion, culture, history, or language. While these components undoubtedly bolster the sense of unity, the true essence of the European demos is anchored in profound and entrenched values, notably the principles of democracy and freedom.

In essence, the driving force behind integration processes, including Albania's EU accession journey, hinges on the identity of the European Union. It's the principles of democracy and freedom, alongside the various components that constitute these foundational values, that have the potential to propel integration forward. Drawing from Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier's definition, I conclude that the closer Albania and its citizens resonate with the global community represented by the EU and align with its core values and guiding norms, the deeper and more robust the institutional bonds that will be demanded. Consequently, existing member states would be more inclined to foster collaborative institutional relationships with countries wishing to join the EU. In understanding the influence of European Union identity on integration, it seems the answer lies at the intersection of constructivism and rationalism. The EU's allure and the momentum behind further integration appear to stem largely from the collective benefits perceived by its citizenry. This encompasses not only economic gains but also the assurance of peace, the upholding of democratic principles, the safeguarding of human rights and freedoms, and the unwavering commitment to the rule of law. These foundational pillars serve as both the bedrock of the European Union and the guiding light for aspirant members navigating the intricacies of the accession process.

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[11] *European Parliament (2015) 'Major trends in European Public Opinion with regard to the European Union?', p.37.*

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *Ibid.*

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